

Lord Meath, Youth, and Empire

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At Lancaster Gate, near Hyde Park in London, there stands a monument to Reginald Brabazon, 12th Earl of Meath. It portrays the figure of a boy looking at the symbols of Empire and on it are inscribed the words 'Youth and Empire'. Lord Meath¹ became famous to our grandparents as the founder of Empire Day. There is also a memorial window to him in St Paul's Cathedral, decorated by the slogans: 'Duty and Discipline', 'Self-Sacrifice', 'One King, One Empire', and 'Empire Day' – mottoes indicative of the direction of Meath's activities as a propagandist. In 1914 *The Court Circular* (23 January) wrote that 'when the history of the progress of Imperialism comes to be written, the Earl of Meath's name will hold high place amongst those who have done solid work in the propaganda of carrying it to successful issue'.

Although it is primarily for his contribution to the organization of Empire Day that Meath won recognition, he had devoted a great deal of his long life to the service of Youth and Empire. He is a key figure for our understanding of the role of militarism and imperialism in the post-Boer War period and a significant figure in the early history of British youth movements. 'His desire was that from their earliest years the children of the Empire should grow up with the thought of its claim upon their remembrance and their service.'²

Meath's social and political attitudes reflected those of the Tory imperialist with a military background, although he himself had

¹ Referred to throughout as Meath although he did not take up the title until his father's death in 1887 and sat in the House of Lords as Baron Chaworth because Meath was an Irish peerage and not an English hereditary title. I am grateful to the 14th Earl for permission to examine his grandfather's papers at Killruddery, the family estate near Dublin.

² From speech by the Duke of Connaught at unveiling of Lancaster Gate memorial in 1934. *The Times*, 25 May 1934.

been prevented by his father from joining the army and had made a career in the diplomatic service. Men such as Lord Roberts, who became President of the National Service League, and Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts, shared common attitudes towards society and youth based on a form of militarism. The role of the militarists in pre-1914 British history is often overlooked, and so the movements that Meath founded, such as the Lads Drill Association, the Duty and Discipline Movement, and Empire Day, should tell us more about this neglected field of social history. The life and opinions of the 12th Earl reveal a great deal about such hitherto ignored topics as the idea of 'good citizenship' in school history text-books for boys, the campaign for the compulsory military training of schoolboys, and the concepts of 'discipline' and 'authority' as moral values adopted by the leaders of youth movements.

Meath was born in 1841 into the aristocracy of absentee Irish landlords. In 1855 he went to Eton – a natural enough choice for someone of his caste – where he received a Spartan training, for the regime prevailing at Eton in the 1850s was still harsh and strict. This is reflected in an anecdote which he tells in his autobiography of a master who accused the boys of 'spinelessness' for brushing snow off their knees:

You young worms! Do you call yourselves British boys? . . . Shame on you! Your fathers are the rulers of England, and your forefathers have made England what she is now. Do you imagine that if they had minded a little snow that Canada would ever have been added to the Empire, or if they had minded heat we should ever possess India or tropical Africa? Never let me see you shrink from either heat or cold. You will have to maintain the Empire which they made.³

Meath's devotion to the cause of Empire and the references in his speeches to the parental duty of bringing up children to accept their responsibilities probably owes something to this incident.

In the 1860s Meath served as a diplomat at British embassies in Frankfurt, Berlin, and Paris. In Germany he acquired a feeling of resentment towards the Germans for their arrogance and their hostility and premeditated coolness to the Embassy staff, that was to last him for the rest of his life. Over fifty years later he remembered forming 'a very strong opinion that we were in for trouble. I

³ Meath, *Memories of the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1923), 19.

felt certain there would be war sooner or later', and so, with remarkable prescience, he 'began to think of making the people understand the danger that threatened'.⁴ Much of Meath's propaganda work in the 1900s was directed at compulsory military training or conscription in case of a German invasion. This was the cleverly bolstered fear behind the National Service League.

A promising diplomatic career was brought to an abrupt end when Meath was posted to Athens and his in-laws objected. Together with his wife, he resolved to devote the remaining years of his life (he was only 36 at the time), 'to the consideration of social problems and the relief of human suffering'.⁵ Thus he embarked on a career of public philanthropy that was to span several decades: from the handsome, black-bearded aristocrat of the 1860s to the bald, white-bearded, benevolent Father Christmas figure most people remember from the later portraits.

His life after leaving the diplomatic service can be conveniently split up into two periods or styles: philanthropic in the 1880s and 1890s, and imperialist in the 1900s. He believed that the body had to be dealt with before the mind would be receptive to improving thoughts of the Empire. In other words, it was not worth indoctrinating the 'poorer classes' until they were physically fit and living under better conditions. As a journalist put it in 1910: 'Beginning with the building up of the material structure by physical education, proceeding with moral development, and thence inculcating the principles that make for good citizenship – discipline, duty, mutual service, and patriotism.'⁶ Thus the apparent dichotomy in Meath's social work is explained, perhaps too glibly, by this element of Social Darwinism in his thought. National efficiency and patriotism could be instilled into the poor only when their social conditions were improved.

The time-lag between Meath's philanthropic and imperial work may also have been due to changing attitudes towards the Empire that were reflected in the causes he took up. In the 1900s England seemed temporarily to have forsaken the White Man's Burden after the shameful defeats of the Boer War; the country was licking

⁴ *The Times*, 24 May 1921.

⁵ Meath, *op. cit.*, 201.

⁶ Anthony Guest, 'Social Ideals: The Earl of Meath', *The Court Journal*, 16 February 1910, 212.

its wounds. The consequent indifference to imperialism may have inspired Meath to become a propagandist for Empire. Commercial and naval rivalry with Germany was also a precipitating factor in Meath's advocacy of compulsory military and patriotic training for the young through the Lads Drill Association, which he founded in 1899.

Whatever the reason, a definite impetus was given to Meath's work for the Empire in the 1900s which assures him an important place in any historical survey of the propagation of the imperial idea. His quasi-religious attachment to Empire (witness the Empire Day Catechism) brought him, either as Chairman, President, or Vice-President, into nearly every movement organized by the military imperialist caste that was active before 1914. Meath was less involved with the small dining and discussion clubs, such as the Fabian Coefficients, than with the Leagues of vast membership, annual reports, and impressive lists of subscribers and MPs, such as the National Service League. The Leagues were less interested in debating the meaning of Empire than in acting as powerful pressure groups to change the policy of the Liberal government.⁷

The social history of the period before the first world war would be sadly deficient without reference to such organizations as the National Service League, to which Meath's Lads Drill Association became affiliated in 1906. Caroline Playne wrote that 'probably there was no other propaganda pre-war organization which permeated the social life of England to the same extent as the National Service League'.⁸ National Service was a euphemism for conscription which, despite the efforts of the League, proved unpopular with the public. After 1906 it became one of the main planks in the League's platform that compulsory military training

⁷ Meath was a Vice-President of the Navy League (1909), and on the Executive Council of the National Service League (1910-14), and the General Council of the Legion of Frontiersmen (1911). He was also a President of the British Girls Patriotic League (1911), and the League of the Empire (1916). Baden-Powell appointed him to the Council of the Boy Scouts Association (1910), and later made him Scout Commissioner for Ireland (1911). He also sat on the committees of various church and charity organizations, such as the Church Army, the Brabazon Employment Society, Lord Roberts' Memorial Workshops etc., and supported the National Social Purity Crusade, the National Council of Public Morals, and the British Empire Union.

⁸ Caroline E. Playne, *The Pre-War Mind in Britain: An Historical Review* (London, 1928), 147.

in schools was an essential basis for any form of national service. After all, children could not vote against such a proposal.⁹

The programme of the Lads Drill Association 'attempted to arouse the British nation to the serious nature of the problem of Imperial Defence' and advocated 'the systematic physical and military training of all British lads, and their instruction in the use of the rifle'.¹⁰ Meath's campaign for military training in schools was conducted along the lines of a military operation. He sent memoranda to the Board of Education, wrote letters to *The Times*, issued annual reports, raised questions in the House of Lords, published booklets of speeches, organized several deputations to the government, and generally exerted himself in a way astonishing for a man in his sixties. All this was to no avail until Haldane introduced a cadet clause into his Territorial Force Bill of 1907 which was resoundingly defeated by the pacifists and socialists in the Commons who objected to the heresy of compulsory military training for boys while at school.¹¹ The propaganda of this Association was ultimately unsuccessful as governments were afraid to alienate the new Labour MPs and radical Liberals by encouraging what could be interpreted as militarism. The element of compulsion involved in Meath's plans and the general indifference of the working-class electorate and elementary school headmasters made his aims even more impracticable.

Another interesting vehicle for imperialist propaganda, in which Meath became involved, was school history text-books. These could inculcate the most absurd prejudices into their young readers; in 1911, for example, Rudyard Kipling wrote some verses for a school history text-book in collaboration with

⁹ Lloyd George believed that the long drawn out campaign of the National Service League increased popular hostility to conscription when the emergency of war made its adoption a necessity: 'The pre-war conscriptionists were associated in the popular mind with extreme jingoism, and in consequence opposition to any suggestion of national military service had become an article of faith with some Liberals and Socialists'. David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, I (London, 1938), 248.

¹⁰ Meath, introduction to Lord Roberts' *Defence of the Empire* (London, 1905), ii.

¹¹ There was an influx of 53 'Lib-Lab' and Labour MPs after the 1906 election whom the Liberals could not afford to alienate, and feelings over 'militarism' ran high. The debate ranged from pacifism (W.P. Byles, Randall Cremer) to jingoism (Courthope, Rees), and 304 MPs voted against military training, 114 for the motion. *Hansard*, 17 June 1907, cols. 243-562.

C.R.L. Fletcher which contained the following interesting piece of information about West Indians:

... The population is mainly black, descended from slaves imported in previous centuries, or of mixed black and white race; lazy, vicious and incapable of any serious improvement, or of work except under compulsion. In such a climate a few bananas will sustain the life of a negro quite sufficiently; why should he work to get more than this? He is quite happy and quite useless, and spends any extra wages which he may earn upon finery.¹²

This particular school history of England, which recommended military training for imperial defence 'to be prepared to fight at any moment', was in print until 1930.

Even G.A. Henty wrote a school text-book, *The Sovereign Reader*, which reflected his interest in imperial warfare and his hostility to trade unionism.¹³ In 1901 Lord Meath wrote an introduction to *Our Empire Past and Present*, the first part of a projected five-volume history whose purpose was to inculcate patriotism and the concept of the 'White Man's Burden' among young schoolboys. He noted that an important step had been taken when the Education Department instructed its inspectors, in their examinations of the fourth and higher grades in elementary schools, to call attention to our distant possessions, 'their productions, government and resources and to those climatic and other conditions' which render them 'suitable fields for emigration and for honourable enterprise'. Since the State had now resolved that children should not grow up in ignorance of what the British Empire was, Meath felt sure that 'the traditions of the Flag, and the example set in the pages of its history may well nourish patriotism'.¹⁴ A second volume was issued in 1905 and then the series collapsed.

In 1906 Cassell's *Illustrated History of England*, in ten volumes, claimed that education diffused the knowledge of the geographical extent of the British Empire: 'Maps of the world, with the British

¹² C.R.L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling, *A School History of England* (Oxford, 1911), 240.

¹³ G.A. Henty, *The Sovereign Reader*: scenes from the life and reign of Queen Victoria, for upper classes in schools (London, 1887). See my article on 'The Rise and Fall of Henty's Empire', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 October 1968.

¹⁴ Meath, *Our Empire Past and Present*, I (London, 1901), 19-20.

possessions coloured red, hung on the walls of all the school-rooms; and it is a trite, yet none the less tremendous, fact that the sun never sets on the school-rooms of the Queen of England. And in those school-rooms the children of the Empire gained their first perception of Imperialism'. This touching faith in the civilizing mission of British imperialism, without which 'the greater portion of the world outside Europe would revert to the darkness and barbarism of the Middle Ages', is somewhat ironically juxtaposed against illustrations of imperialism in action: the charging of lancers, storming of heights, and general slaughtering of natives which decorate its pages describing the Empire.¹⁵

The general impression gained on reading this type of material, meant for the impressionable young, is one of weary attitudinizing. Stale slogans and clichés constantly bombard the reader until he accepts their message with a tired acquiescence. 'Citizenship', 'Empire', and 'Patriotism' form the Holy Trinity of the imperialist text-book author, and by constant repetition they lose their emotive currency as propaganda terms.¹⁶

In the immediate pre-1914 period, Meath was devoting his prodigious committee-running energies to two further schemes aimed at schoolchildren and their parents, with the intention of making them aware of their responsibilities as 'citizens of the greatest Empire the world had ever seen'. These were the Duty and Discipline Movement, of which Meath was first Chairman and President from 1912 to 1919, and the Empire Day Movement, which he founded and presided over from 1903 to 1913, when a committee took over some of the running of Empire Day. As one journalist pointed out: 'it is as founder and active propagator of the Empire Day Movement that the Earl of Meath is popularly known. If he had done nothing else he would be justly entitled to fame'.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Cassell's Illustrated History of England*, IX (London, 1906), 195-6.

¹⁶ Other examples of school history text-books of the 1900s with a similar bias are: Collins School Series, *The Story of Britain*, Books IV and V, Junior and Intermediate (London, 1905); Collins *Young Briton's History Readers*, 3 vols.; H.P. Arnold-Forster, *History of England* (London, 1904), and *The Citizen Reader* (London, 1904); J. St. Loe Strachey, *The Citizen and the State*, Part 2 (London, 1904), etc. All contain patriotic appeals couched in nationalistic language and celebrate the lives of Victorian imperial heroes.

¹⁷ G.A. Leask, 'The Father of Empire Day', *Great Thoughts of Master Minds*, 22 May 1920, 134.

The objects of the Duty and Discipline Movement were stated as being to 'combat softness, slackness, indifference and indiscipline and to stimulate discipline and a sense of duty and alertness throughout the national life, especially during the formative period of home and school training, and to give reasonable support to all legitimate authority'.¹⁸ Meath's answer to the social disturbances of the 1900s was to demand a strengthening of authority, discipline, and the family. By surviving into the 1920s, he made the commonplace ideas of the late-Victorian Tory sound like precursors of fascism. Together with vice-presidents drawn from the Establishment of the day – Dukes, Cardinals, Bishops, and Field-Marshal – he urged the necessity for duty and discipline as 'a remedy for feelings of class-hatred aroused by socialism and the appeals of politicians to sectional interests'.

It is perhaps significant that Meath first aired the idea of such a movement in the newspapers at the time of Lloyd George's 1909 Budget, which was seen as a threat to many aristocratic incomes. Membership doubled to over 4,000 between 1913 and 1917, but the years 1910–12, which saw the beginnings of the movement, also saw the spread of syndicalism among trade unions and strikes of seamen, dockers, railwaymen, and miners. One of the movement's collections of essays was called *Anarchy or Order* – the alternatives Meath believed the country was facing on the outbreak of war.

The Duty and Discipline Movement issued leaflets, sets of essays, and books designed to influence public opinion. Annual meetings were held at which Meath warned the faithful of the decadent effect on the Empire of the lack of discipline among schoolchildren. The imperialism behind the movement was always present throughout Meath's speeches, preaching to the converted at ladies' garden parties in Hampstead or to meetings of the League of Empire. From 1911 to 1912 a series of forty essays were published to supply ammunition for virtuous spinsters like Wilkie Collins's Miss Clack, famous for her distribution of tracts. A projected magazine of the movement bore the revealing title *Law and Order*. What more reassuring slogan could be promoted in an age of uncertainty and change?

It is difficult to estimate the effectiveness of the movement's

¹⁸ *The Duty and Discipline Movement and the War*, D.&D. leaflet (London, 1917), n.p., an address delivered at a conference of headmasters.

propaganda, since it dealt with principles and not with methods. 'Duty and discipline' was an authoritarian, middle-class reaction to the weakening of parental discipline and the questioning of authority in an age of gradual emancipation from Victorian values. Meath resurrected Victorian virtues while the Edwardians were busily repudiating Victorian domestic tyranny. By displacing his political and social anxieties onto the training of children, Meath succeeded in coming to terms with the pre-1914 world. Even *The Times* (12 October 1929) observed that the titles of his movements possessed 'a Victorian and sometimes rather a forbidding ring'. Imperialists like Meath were intent on perpetuating the 'status quo ante' as the generation gap between the leaders of youth movements, their lieutenants and the boys themselves, became increasingly wide. According to *The Spectator* (5 January 1928), Meath was 'a strong militarist' who 'looks to "discipline" for the salvation of a generation whose softness he would seem to exaggerate'.

The Empire Day Movement, which Meath founded, reflected his preoccupation with the moral decline of the 1900s. It was basically an imperial mutual admiration society, founded to 'arouse interest in the need for promoting imperial education and knowledge, particularly through schools, so that rising generations might be fully conscious of their Empire heritage, privileges and responsibilities'.¹⁹ The idea itself came from Canada in the 1890s but Meath was its most persistent British advocate, providing the movement with a programme and a set of ideas and attitudes. The first public meetings to promote Empire Day were held in London in 1904, but in 1908 the House of Commons turned down a proposal for official recognition of such a day by a majority of 68 votes, the announcement of the figures being received with loud Irish Nationalist and Labour cheers. Because of strong anti-jingoist feeling, Meath only succeeded in obtaining government support for Empire Day in 1916 – a decade after it had become a statutory holiday in most of the Dominions. Lord Milner forwarded the motion in the House of Lords. It was the war rather than Meath's incessant propaganda efforts which brought recognition.

The movement was run entirely on voluntary lines, without any

¹⁹ Handout on the 'Importance of Empire Knowledge and the Origin and Purpose of Empire Day,' issued by EDM, July 1948 (cyclostyled), 1, in Royal Commonwealth Society Library.

supervision by the Board of Education. In 1916 the government had, however, agreed to fly the Union Jack from public buildings on 24 May – Empire Day. It was hoped that local education committees and school managers would follow suit and sanction Empire Day in the schools under their control; no central compulsion was exerted upon local authorities. Meath avoided an organized bureaucracy in order to steer clear of party politics, as he himself explained in 1921:

I worked it entirely myself. I had no committee. That was deliberate policy. If I secured prominent men, I thought they would be very busy and not attend meetings. If I had men of cut-and-dried opinions, they would quarrel. There was the danger, too, of Tory and Radical divisions; and I meant to avoid politics. The work cost me many, many thousands of pounds. Not until I became a comparatively poor man, and had neither the money nor the strength to continue unaided, did I look around for a committee.²⁰

However, Meath's known affiliation to the National Service League, on whose Executive Council he served from 1910 to 1914, laid Empire Day open to attack from anti-militarists. His imperialism created a general atmosphere of jingoism which his successors had to live down if they were to persuade schools to take up the celebration.

In 1913 a committee took over the day-to-day running of Empire Day which in 1922, after Meath's retirement from the Presidency the year before, became affiliated to the Royal Colonial Institute. At the end of 1945 the Empire Day Movement terminated, by mutual agreement, its connection with the then Royal Empire Society, and adopted its own independent constitution with a Director and an Assistant Director. From 1946 to 1948 school membership of the movement amounted to some 1200 schools in Britain, and a quarterly journal, *New Empire*, was published. In the 1950s there was also an Empire Youth Sunday Movement, but after the death of Viscount Bledisloe, its President, it lost much of its impetus. In 1958 Empire Day was changed to Commonwealth Day and the movement took offices with the Imperial Institute in South Kensington. When in 1962 the Institute moved to new premises, as the Commonwealth Institute, the

²⁰ *The Times*, 24 May 1921.

Commonwealth Day Movement disappeared as an independent organization.

Curiously enough, as the power of the Empire waned between the two world wars, the strength of public interest in ceremonies like Empire Day seemed to increase. Before 1914 Empire Day Reviews had been held in Hyde Park, but in the 1920s these were eclipsed in interest by the fervour which marked such occasions as the 1925 Empire Day Thanksgiving Service celebrated at Wembley Stadium before an audience estimated at 90,000. Empire Day came to serve a religious function in an increasingly secular world. J. A. Hobson claimed that the saluting of the flag on Empire Day was a symbolic ritual, a semi-conscious endeavour to direct to patriotic purposes the fund of superstition liberated by the weakening of religious attachments.²¹

It is often forgotten that behind Empire Day was a coherent social and moral doctrine, similar to the Japanese concept of 'bushido', that Meath sought to instil into the young. Its founder was obsessed with the idea of inculcating the virtues of patriotism, loyalty, obedience, self-sacrifice, and service to the State; 'in short they desire to see the rising generation taught to subordinate the individual to the common interest'.²² Compulsory military training in schools was to be part of this obligation to the community. The survival of the Empire depended on training the young to undertake their responsibilities.

When asked for proof of the success of his mission, Meath claimed that the Empire Day Movement was partially responsible for the influx of volunteers when war broke out in 1914: 'evidently, then, a large proportion of those young men from all parts of the Empire, who rushed to the Colours during the bloody years from 1914, must have learnt at school the watch-words of the Movement. Would they have answered their country's call so readily', he asked rhetorically, 'if they had not acquired in their early years a knowledge of the obligations of free citizenship? We may claim that the movement was not without effect on the successful prosecution of the world war in defence of liberty and justice.'²³ The climate of unthinking patriotism sedulously fostered by the

²¹ J. A. Hobson, *Free Thought in the Social Sciences* (London, 1926), 40.

²² Meath, open letter to the press, *Letters, Addresses and Information* (EDM, 1906), 1, in Rhodes House Library, Oxford.

²³ *The Times*, *loc. cit.*

Empire Day Movement, the Boy Scouts, and the Church Lads Brigade, undoubtedly contributed to the military ardour of 1914, but empirical verification of these influences on the young is difficult to document.

In 1904 the Empire Day Movement suggested that Empire Day should be celebrated in schools chiefly by the hoisting and saluting of the flag. This was to be followed by an assembly of local dignitaries and an address on citizenship or a short lecture on the Empire. Then came a recitation from Kipling and the singing of the national anthem. Throughout the week special lessons were to be given on imperial topics, for example, history and geography were given an Empire bias during Empire Day week. The emphasis was on a continuing process of indoctrination. By the 1930s everything had become more streamlined and ample. Schools could choose from among an Empire Service, the performance of an Empire play or pageant, an exhibition of Empire products, film and slide lectures, a school concert, a recitation of heroic English poems, an Empire Day wireless programme, a display of imperial flags in the playground and the observance of the slogan 'Empire Meals on Empire Day'. In addition, the traditional speeches and assemblies were continued; for the children there was the compensation of the halfday holiday which some schools were granted.

In the 1930s the Empire Day Movement also issued sophisticated modern equipment, providing additional information on the Empire in a visual and recorded form. It is worth itemizing if only to illustrate that visual aids are by no means an invention of the 1960s. The hand-outs included a booklet on the life and reign of King George V designed for distribution to schoolchildren; a handbook for Empire Day speakers on *The Pioneers of the Empire*; a *Junior History of the British Empire Overseas* by Professor A.P. Newton, which was a textbook for 12-15 year olds; an Empire Day Community Song Sheet suitable for use at such gatherings; a leaflet called 'Some Facts for Empire Day' for schoolchildren; an Empire Day Message from the President of the movement; a set of flags on loan for use in the celebrations; a set of thirteen recordings of King George's voice on gramophone records; small samples of various Empire products for school museums supplied by the Imperial Institute at 1d a packet; picture post-cards of the Empire's industries; the Empire Day

Movement badge, and finally a special booklet – the one for 1936 was entitled *Edward VIII, Inheritor of a Tradition*.²⁴

This gives some idea of the amount of propaganda which was available thirty years after the movement's inception. Schools receiving such material could certainly make Empire Day into an elaborate ceremony, although this would to some extent depend on the patriotic ardour of the headmaster, his staff, and the school management committee. Many among the older generation today retain clear memories of Empire Day as it was celebrated when they were schoolchildren. I am not suggesting that this turned them into militant imperialists but merely that an awareness of nationalism and an identification with the Empire was rigorously fostered in children at a most impressionable age. Whether this process of socialization was a good or a bad thing is another question. Obviously, there were strong social pressures on headmasters to adopt Empire Day ceremonies; only one recorded case has been found of a headmaster refusing to allow the saluting of the flag and he sued parents in Leyton for a statement in a petition that it had been deliberate, winning heavy damages against them.²⁵

In the 1900s, Empire Day was initially more popular in the middle-class suburban areas of London, the south-eastern counties and the coastal resorts in the south of England. Cathedral cities also predominated. After the first world war its observance was more widespread, although several left-wing dominated councils and education committees refused to celebrate Empire Day on the grounds that it encouraged militarism. In 1903 the Executive Council of the Social Democratic Federation passed a resolution on these lines and suggested as a half-serious alternative to Empire Day the observance of the first of May – International Labour Day – as a school holiday.²⁶

Battersea Borough Council refused to celebrate Empire Day in April 1907. The socialists on the Council accused the movement of encouraging the spirit of jingoism and pointed out that the Empire's chief function was to provide jobs for the sons of the middle classes as well as being used as a Tory vote-catcher in elections.²⁷ In 1909, Derby Educational Committee refused, by a

²⁴ *Annual Reports of the Empire Day Movement, 1904, 1935.*

²⁵ *Evening Standard*, 16 July 1929.

²⁶ *Daily News*, 8 May 1903.

²⁷ *South Western Star*, 2 April 1907.

majority of one, to recognize Empire Day since it was 'the thin end of militarism'.²⁸

During the 1920s there were similar sporadic rumblings of protest against the whole ethos of Empire Day. In 1921 Edmonton District Council refused to hoist the Union Jack on the Town Hall on Empire Day and the British Empire Union moved in, rather bizarrely, to 'rout the communists'.²⁹ Leyton Trades Council attacked Empire Day as 'a capitalist ramp' in 1928, in protest against a regulation of the Leyton Education Committee that it should include the saluting of the Union Jack. They issued a manifesto claiming that the local Tories were using the flag for election purposes and that the Empire was a capitalist plot. The manifesto suggested that children stay away from school on Empire Day or refuse to salute the flag and sing patriotic songs. The local Ratepayers' Association then retaliated by demanding reprisals against parents or children who co-operated in these proposals, and called the manifesto a 'wicked' and 'seditious' attack on patriotism.³⁰ Such emotionally charged attitudes make it clear that Empire Day had become synonymous for the left wing with 'capitalist exploitation', while for the right wing it meant 'patriotism' and the preservation of the British Empire. The presence of extremist bodies, like the Social Democratic Federation on the left and the British Empire Union on the right, made it all the more likely that Empire Day would be seized upon for the propaganda value it offered to both camps, polarizing as it did a central issue of politics.

In conclusion, Meath's role in the training of Edwardian youth should be seen in the context of his militarized brand of imperialism. One of his chief aims was the indoctrination of devotion to the Empire among schoolchildren. The movements discussed here – the Lads Drill Association, the campaign for the compulsory military training of schoolboys, the Duty and Discipline Movement, the Empire Day Movement – were all expressions of Meath's imperialism. In 1915 a newspaper even wrote that 'no man in this country has done more to inculcate patriotism in the minds of children than has the Earl of Meath'.³¹ He was then

²⁸ *The Patriot*, December 1909, 2.

²⁹ British Empire Union, *Annual Report*, 1921, British Commonwealth Union Offices, London.

³⁰ *Walthamstow Guardian*, 25 May 1928.

³¹ *Weekly Dispatch*, 28 November 1915.

seventy-four years old. Living into the 1920s he carried with him something of the quality of a survivor from another century. There is an unmistakeable authoritarian strain in his thought which was emphasized by the hysterical climate of the first world war – as his speeches in the House of Lords on aliens, suspected German spies, and conscientious objectors so vividly reveal. The collectivism of the Edwardian military imperialist was illustrated by Meath's anti-liberal glorification of the State; he wanted conscription to replace the 'much over-rated' liberty of the individual. He strongly believed that if past patterns of social behaviour were restored there would be a revival of the obedience and respect in which authority had formerly been held.

When imperialism was declining as a dynamic force in British history after the first world war, the Victorian ideals and values which Meath championed no longer seemed relevant. As *The Spectator* pointed out (5 January 1928), just before Meath died, at the age of 88, he was still upholding ideas from which, for better or worse, the world was turning away:

He dreams of a drilled population . . . the house accustomed from youth up to submit to authority, the rich considering the needs of the poor, and all men serving the State – in fact, a society in which obedience takes once more its medieval place in the hierarchy of the virtues. It is a very noble ideal; in its pursuit Lord Meath has done a vast amount of good, but the world seems to be moving towards new reforms along other lines.